

PHRASING

The Nature of Phrasing

Phrasing gives shape to musical expression, much like rhyme gives structure to poetry. It allows music to flow naturally, combining expression with clarity, balance, and a sense of unity.

It is closely related to what may be called the architectonic ear—the ability to perceive and understand musical structure, relationships, and hierarchy, both in listening and in playing.

Phrasing is conveyed in playing through intonation and arm weight.

Simply mapping the structure of musical sections in the mind is not sufficient to experience phrasing or to connect it to the instrument.

One may think of musical structure as an outline, while intonation and arm weight provide the depth, colour, and intensity within that outline.

Without this connection, energy may build internally without being transmitted into sound, which can lead to unnecessary tension in both mind and body.



The Role of Hairpins in Phrasing

Hairpins in a musical score do not always indicate a change in dynamics, unless they are accompanied by markings such as crescendo, diminuendo, or explicit dynamic indications.



When no dynamic change is specified, hairpins may function as agogic notation.



Agogic refers to subtle expressive shaping of timing—often described as rubato. This involves small, temporary adjustments in tempo.

An opening hairpin may suggest a slight expansion of time and energy, while a closing hairpin may imply a gentle forward movement.

Because changes in timing can also influence the perception of sound, hairpins in this context may reflect both agogic shaping and subtle variations in sonority.

It is important to note that there is no single, universal interpretation of hairpins. Their meaning can vary depending on the composer and historical context.

If hairpins are not supported by clear dynamic markings in the score, they can be disregarded. Instead, shape your own phrasing rather than relying on markings that may be inconsistent or arbitrary.

The Role of Slurs in Phrasing

Slurs can also be open to interpretation, as their meaning varies across different periods and composers.

When structuring your own phrasing, do not rely on slurs as a primary guide. As with hairpins, they do not provide a sufficiently consistent or structured basis for building complete phrasing.

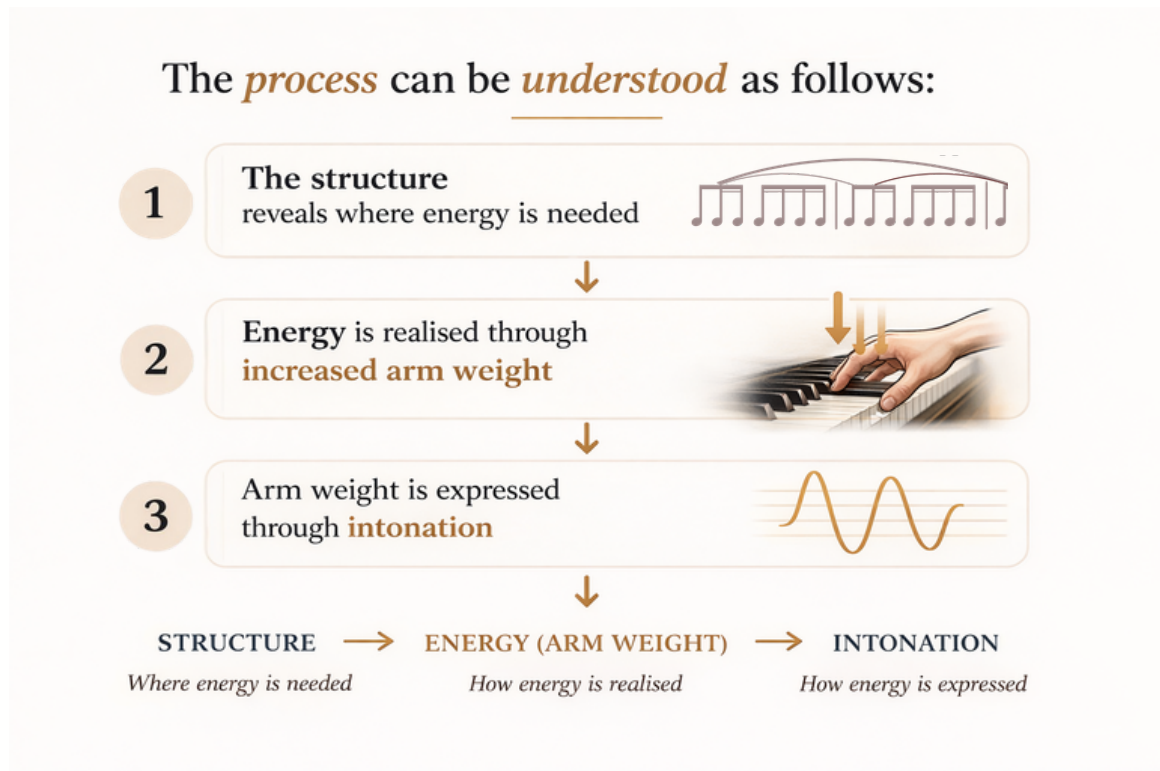
Interestingly, when you create your own phrasing you will notice that, most of the time, slurs and hairpins are in synchronicity with the resulting musical shape.



THE MECHANICS OF PHRASING

When the more prominent points within a phrase are identified, they indicate where additional energy and arm weight should be applied.

The process can be understood as follows:
 the structure reveals where energy is needed;
 energy is realised through increased arm weight;
 arm weight is expressed through intonation.



This method also supports a more natural musical flow. The ability to distribute weight gradually helps avoid a common issue: assigning excessive energy to too many elements at once.
 For example: speak – ing – like – this.

It is important to note that the application of energy and weight through intonation may be independent of sound imagination and dynamics. For example, a segment may be given greater emphasis through a sense of expansion—such as in the diaphragm—while the dynamic level is reduced. This approach was often used by pianists in the early twentieth century to shape expressive melodic lines.

ENERGY FLOW IN PHRASING

In this context, breathing does not refer to physical respiration, but to the natural ebb and flow of energy within the mind and body.

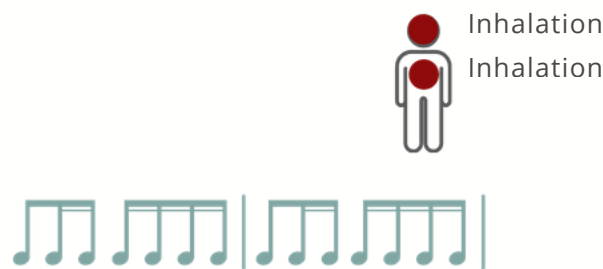
The natural ebb and flow of energy in the mind and body creates a corresponding sensation of inhaling and exhaling within the hand muscles. This supports a balanced and flexible level of tension in playing.

As noted earlier, unhealthy tension in the hands often arises when this balance is lost—when the energy remains in a constant state of either accumulation or release. In both cases, the hand muscles become restricted, lacking the freedom of natural breathing.

The Benefits of Arm Weight in Phrasing

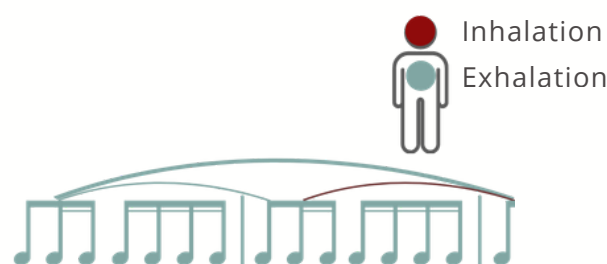
Without the use of arm weight, phrasing tends to resemble a continuous inhalation.

As the music approaches more prominent points, energy builds both mentally and physically, without a corresponding release.



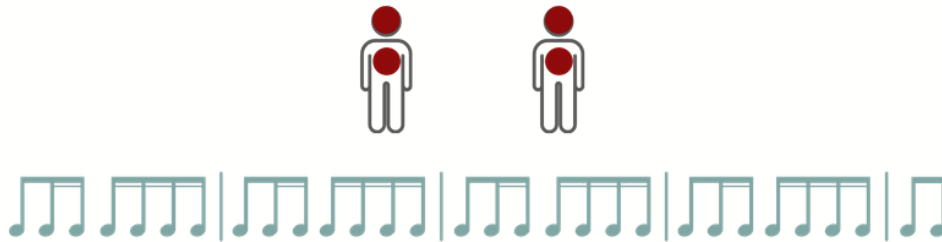
With the use of arm weight, phrasing becomes a balanced cycle of inhaling and exhaling.

In the mind, energy builds as the phrase develops; in the body, it is released through arm weight, allowing a natural sense of relaxation.



The Benefits of Clear Structure in Phrasing

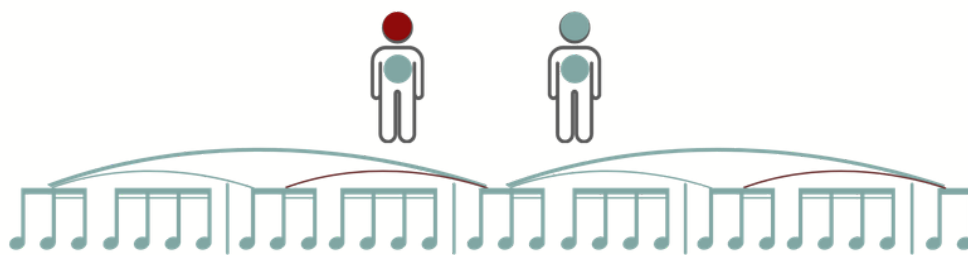
Without a clear and consistent structure in phrasing, the hierarchy of musical elements becomes unclear. This can create uncertainty in the mind, which in turn keeps the body in a constant state of elevated energy.



Well-structured phrasing provides clarity about where to apply greater intention and energy, and where to release it. This supports a natural cycle of engagement and relaxation in both mind and body.

Apply more energy to the main motifs and phrases.

Return to a lower level of energy, fully exhaling after the main parts.



OPEN LESSONS

